IT WAS THE YOUNG PJ'S FIRST RESCUE MISSION ON LOW BIRD. HE WAS TRAINED, READY AND EAGER TO FACE HIS FIRST REAL TEST.

AGAINST ALL ODDS

by A1C DAVE COLE

For Extraordinary Heroism

by SMSgt. JAMES A. GEORGE
The Airman Staff

ONE DAY AT A TIME

That's how he'd survived nearly 250 combat missions. But time ran out. When they found him he had a rifle in one hand, a medical kit in the other.

LATE in the afternoon of April 11, 1966, the 1st US Infantry Division's Charlie Company, 2d Battalion, 16th Infantry Regiment, was engaged in a searching sweep named Operation Abilene. The company had pushed its way into an area 45 miles east of Saigon and 12 miles west of the resort area of Vung Tau. Then, Viet Cong small arms and mortar fire abruptly turned the peaceful jungle into a roaring hell. The barrage came from all sides. The men of Charlie Company found themselves swiftly cut off from the rest of the US forces.

Army Sgt. Fred C. Navarro, leader of a 10-man rifle squad, was hit. Seven of his men were killed. But Navarro was able to continue fighting. Within the hour following the deadly ambush Navarro met a 21-year-old pararescueman whom he came to know as "Pits." Their acquaintance was all too brief. About an hour and a half after the two young Americans met, A1C William H. Pitsenbarger was killed by the enemy.

For extraordinary heroism on that incredible day, Pitsenbarger was posthumously awarded the Air Force Cross—the first USAF enlisted man to be presented the nation's second highest military award.

No stranger to peril, the Piqua, Ohio, pararescueman was nearing his 300th combat mission in Vietnam. He had ridden jungle penetrators into hostile territories on several occasions to rescue men in trouble. Just a month before Operation Abilene—on March 7—he'd been lowered from a hovering chopper into a burning minefield to rescue a Vietnamese soldier. The soldier had lost part of a foot when he stepped on a land mine. Pitsenbarger considered the dangerous rescue a routine part of his duties as a member of Det. 6, 38th Air Rescue Squadron, Bien Hoa AB, Vietnam. Modesty notwithstanding, he was awarded the Airman's Medal (also posthumously) for the rescue.

But April 11, 1966, was different. When Pitsenbarger's HH-43B commander shouted *"Let's go!"* to his crew at Bien Hoa there was an urgency in his voice. Capt. (now major) Harold D. Salem lifted his *Huskie* off the pad at Bien Hoa and, along with another HH-43B, raced for the battle area to help evacuate Charlie Company's wounded soldiers.

It was about a 30-minute flight. Pitsenbarger used the time to check his equipment and prepare himself mentally and physically for the mission. When Captain Salem arrived over the jungle area where C Company was fighting for its life, he put his copter into a hover just over the tops of the highest trees. But it was too high. The hoist cable, only 200 feet in length, wouldn't reach the ground. There was a small opening in the treetops, so Captain Salem cautiously worked his craft lower, until he was actually flying below the top canopy. Later, he described that narrow opening as a "little bitty hole." But it was the only way in, and he took it.

Pitsenbarger pulled down one of the three spring-loaded seats on the penetrator hoist, straddled it, and was lowered into the smoke-saturated jungle. Inside the *Huskie,* Sgt. Gerald Hammond operated the hoist. As soon as Pitsenbarger was on the ground he gave a thumbs-up signal. Hammond reeled the hoist in, un-

Pararescueman A1C William H. Pitsenbarger made open-sea jump to prepare for mission.

Maj. Harold D. Salem was HH-43B rescue pilot.

hooked it, attached a litter basket, and sent it back down through the heavy foliage.

When he reached the ground, Pitsenbarger immediately started giving medical treatment to wounded infantrymen, readying them for air evacuation. He and Hammond worked together to get three men into the HH-43B. Then Captain Salem and Maj. Maurice Kessler, his copilot, pulled out of the trees and headed for Bien Ba with their cargo. Pitsenbarger stayed with the 17 or 18 survivors of Charlie Company who were still trying to fight off the enemy. The men were being picked off by deadly sniper fire and blasted by occasional mortars.

The second HH-43 maneuvered gingerly into the treetop hole above, and Pitsenbarger started sending up more wounded Americans. While he was busy treating the injured, hacking splints from snarled vines and trees, placing the wounded in the basket, and signaling the hoist operator when to haul it up, Pitsenbarger was continually exposed to enemy fire. He ignored it.

Shortly after the second *Huskie* crew pulled out of the trees with several wounded soldiers, Captain Salem returned for another load. He described what happened.

"We had just worked into position in that narrow opening. It was almost impossible to see anything below because of the smoke. (The infantrymen were using smoke grenades to camouflage their positions and hide their movements.) Hammond was lowering the litter basket, still 8 or 10 feet above Pits' head, when all hell broke loose.

"The VC really poured it on us from below, apparently aiming everything they had right at us to knock us out of the treetops. We took hits all over the aircraft, including our oil lines, and we immediately began losing RPM at a rapid rate. We either had to go down, or get out of there fast before we lost all power.

"Hammond could see Pitsenbarger below, looking up at us. And when Hammond beckoned him to grab the basket and come out with us, Pits just gave him a wave-off. So we hauled out of there—or tried to. The basket got hung up in the trees and we had to cut the cable loose to get out." Not far from the ambush scene, the HH-43B pilot made an emergency landing.

Pitsenbarger had made a split-second decision when he saw the *Huskie* taking direct hits overhead and Hammond waving at him. Without hesitation he elected to stay with the wounded Army survivors. The decision cost him his life.

Sergeant Navarro later told how Pitsenbarger continued to treat the wounded as the badly mauled Charlie Company tried desperately to keep the Viet Cong at bay. When the infantrymen began running out of ammo, the young pararescueman traded his pistol for a rifle and left Navarro's side. He ran from man to man, through the smoking jungle, gathering ammo clips from those who could spare them—or from those who could no longer use them. Soon he came diving back and hit the ground beside Navarro. He had distributed ammo clips to some of the other defenders, and brought back about 20 clips for Navarro's dwindling squad. Then he took up a position alongside the riflemen and added his weapon to their defensive firepower.

"We had planned to withdraw from the area and set up a new defense somewhere else," Navarro said, "but the enemy fire was coming from every side. They were lobbing mortars in on us, too."

"When the firing stopped," Navarro said, "it was so dark in the jungle that you couldn't see your hand in front of your face. There must've been a hundred VC out there, and they were yelling back and forth to each other that they were going to make an all-out assault to finish us off. Our Vietnamese interpreter told us what was going on, and urged our lieutenant to call artillery in on our position to keep the enemy off our backs. Meanwhile, we learned later, VC women were slipping

Mr. and Mrs. William Pitsenbarger accept posthumous award of Air Force Cross from USAF Chief of Staff General John P. McConnell at Pentagon.

through our lines in the darkness, stealing weapons and ammo and carrying off the bodies of dead VC all around us. They killed some of our wounded, too.

"When the artillery came it was accurate. We were getting about five or six rounds every 15 seconds and the shots were coming down about 25 to 30 meters from our position. It had to be close to do us any good. The artillery kept up all night until around o-seven-hundred."

In a joint Air Force-Army rescue on April 12, helicopters flew back to the site of the heavy jungle fight. Pararescuemen from HH-43s and infantrymen from Army CH-47 *Chinook* helicopters were lowered into the smoking, twisted jungle to help the handful of Charlie Company riflemen and hack out a clearing large enough to permit the *Chinooks* to land with reinforcements.

An airman from the air rescue helicopter found Pitsenbarger—a rifle in his hand, a medical kit in the other.

Navarro estimated that Airman Pitsenbarger was killed at about 7:30 p.m., while he was helping the Army riflemen defend against enemy snipers. Five enemy bullets had found their mark, and the day ended with swift finality for the youthful pararescueman.

Less than 20 of the 180 infantrymen from the "Big Red One" company had survived the ambush and nightlong attack.

As a pararescueman, Pitsenbarger had learned to live just one day at a time, taking each day as it came and dealing with its problems to the best of his ability. On September 22, 1966, Air Force Chief of Staff General John P. McConnell presented the Air Force Cross to Airman Pitsenbarger's parents.

Ohio Senator Frank Lausche was there as the Piqua, Ohio, couple accepted the medal that was awarded posthumously to their only son. The Senator, deeply moved, inserted a tribute to Pitsenbarger in the *Congressional Record* (September 22, 1966) that concluded:

"I was present when this high award was made to the mother and father of William Pitsenbarger. They stood there heroically, in my opinion reflecting the courageous and stalwart character of their son.

"The mother was brave. The father shed tears. But both were proud.

"At the conclusion of the award, I felt that I was spiritually cleansed and fortified for better rendition of service in the responsibility which I have for my government. I only regret that others were not present.

"Ohio is proud of Airman First Class William H. Pitsenbarger and his parents. Piqua, the little village from which Pitsenbarger came, likewise has great reason to express honor and pride in the achievements of this young man."

PASS THE WORD

by CMSgt. PAUL W. AIREY
Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force

REGARDLESS of how well 1968 treated us, or how badly, chances are we could have made it better for ourselves, and more meaningful for others.

How? By communicating with our men more directly and more often.

Lack of proper communication has plagued military men throughout history. It isn't too difficult to imagine that when George Washington crossed the Delaware one of his men missed the boat. Either he didn't get the word or didn't get it correctly.

A cardinal rule of good management is to "keep your men informed." Yet, haven't you met men in supervisory positions who still believe it isn't necessary to give the reasons behind a policy change or behind an unpleasant job?

Another pitfall is ambiguous instruction. How many times have you been confronted by a First Sergeant's bulletin board notice that says one thing, but that could be interpreted as meaning something else. For instance "Flight jackets will be worn only by flying crews." Does it mean only crewmen on flight orders will wear the jacket? Or does it mean that the men will wear it only on the days they fly a mission?

It's a new year so start with a clean slate. Do yourself a favor in 1969. Do the Air Force a favor in 1969. Concentrate on passing the word along and when you do, be clear.